

Rejecting Authenticity in the Desert Landscapes of the Modern Middle East:
Development Processes in the Jiddat il-Harasiis, Oman

Dawn Chatty

Nomads throughout the Middle East have been viewed through a lens of romantic attachment or latterly uncomfortable disdain and disparagement. For decades they have been subjected to state-sponsored as well as international settlement efforts in the name of modernity, progress and more recently environmental protection. Peoples who move have challenged the neo-colonial projects of the League of Nations Mandate era as well as the post World War II independent nation by the sheer fact of their mobility. Movement, as Ernest Gellner, pointed out made these peoples 'marginal' to the state, in that they could move out of the orbit of state control (Gellner 1969; also see Scott 2009). Despite efforts by central authorities to control and extend authority over these peoples, a political order outside the state continues to characterize nomads with their tribal, kin-based social organization in the Middle East.

The Harasiis nomadic pastoral tribe have been, for centuries, the sole human inhabitants of the central desert of Oman. In the 1930s, the reigning sovereign named this desert, the Jiddat il-Harasiis in recognition of their connection with the land. This remote tribe, one of six in the region who continue to speak south Arabian languages predating Arabic, is organized around a subsistence economy based on the raising of camel and goat. Mobility over the vast and largely inhospitable rock and gravel plain of the Jiddat il-Harasiis has been the principle feature of their livelihood focused on camel transport and latterly on trucks. The authenticity of their attachment to this region is intimately tied to the traditional distinction in Islamic historiography between *bedu* in the deserts and *hadar* in the towns and cities. Recent decades in the Sultanate of

Oman, however, have seen increasing effort by government, international conservation agencies and multi-national extractive industries to re-describe and classify this land as “*terra nullius*” (empty of people). Efforts to move the Harasiis out of their encampments, to settle them in government housing, and to turn them into cheap day labourers all point to the rejection of these peoples’ claims of belonging to the landscapes of the desert. This paper examines these developmental processes, both national and international, and explores the ways in which the Harasiis have responded by becoming more mobile and adapting their living and herding arrangements as well as by generally becoming unresponsive to state development efforts. A small element of the Harasiis as well as other tribal groups in south eastern Arabia have begun to reject the confines of the state and instead assert their transnational identity across the borders with international borders with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates where their authenticity as “bedu” is generally recognized.

Authenticity, Landscape, and Identity

The desert-dwelling inhabitants of the Oman, organized in tribes are recognized as *bedu*, while tribes and extended families in the mountain and coastal settlements of the country are regarded as *hadar*.¹ This *bedu-hadar* distinction has deep roots in Muslim history and historiography (c.f. Ibn Khaldûn 1958). In the medieval period Arab writers saw the significant forms of social categories in the dichotomy between the city and the country; or between civilization and its presumed absence. From the perspective of the settled urban historian, the pinnacle of civilization was the city with its government, places of worship, schools and markets. The city and town dweller was *hadari*. The other extreme, the *badia* (desert), was defined by its lack of *hadar* or civilization and was represented by the social category of *badawi* or *bedu*. The latter were mainly

the desert dwellers, the nomadic pastoral camel and sheep herders. The different landscapes of the *bedu* and *hadar* had important cultural and social dimensions in the understanding of human activity.ⁱⁱ The urban and settled notion of human life versus rural and nomadic divide became, over time, a deeply ingrained idealization of social categories; which are no longer clearly defined or distinguished. Furthermore though the term *hadar/hadari* is hardly referred to any longer, the term *bedu* remains in contemporary use. For the *bedu* such self-identification is a statement of tribal identity and solidarity as well as attachment to the desert landscape which is a physical background and social and cultural foreground. This desert is constantly shaped and reshaped by social processes and interactions with the physical environment; it is a physical space and a socio-cultural place as well as a form of ambience and a perceptual surround (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995). However, when non-*bedu* use the term, particularly contemporary Omani government officials and international civil servants, it is often a statement of contempt, highlighting the presumed backwardness and primitiveness of this social category with no reference to the desert landscape.ⁱⁱⁱ In general, *bedu* tribes and tribal views of events are relegated to the “moral margins” by settled bureaucrats, government officials and international experts (Dresch 1989).

Nationalism and identity are two concepts which are at the heart of the processes described above. The Sultanate of Oman had its modern “birth” in 1970 after a “near-bloodless” palace coup brought the Sultan Qaboos to the throne. From that moment the Sultan and his advisors have struggled to create an imagined political community of a unified nation (see Anderson 1983). The first few decades after the birth of this new nation saw campaigns to attract educated and professional Omanis in exile to return to create the modern state (Peterson 1978). This paper posits that once these outsiders and expatriates had integrated and transformed themselves into “insiders,” they set about creating an ‘imagined’

nation which was homogenous and modern. Furthermore, in order to promote the development of its extractive industries, the desert interior was declared terra nullius -state land- empty of land claims. Thus the authentic inhabitants in the “background landscapes” such as the deserts (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995) became the “outsiders.” The tension between the outsider ‘traditions’ and new insider “modernities” appears to be resolved in a representation that encapsulates the political and cultural fiction of a unified nation at the expense of the *bedu* tribes of the interior deserts; *bedu* claims to authenticity are thus increasingly rejected or cast aside as insignificant.

Identity, national or otherwise, is closely tied to language and the spoken word often becomes an iconic marker of national belonging. The Omani national language, in this case Arabic, is not a neutral tool of communication. It represents the language of the “hegemonic” ethnic group in power, the Ibadi of Oman rather than the once preferred language, Swahili, of many of the returning expatriate Omanis from Zanzibar and East Africa. The gradual emergence of Arabic as the sole formal language of government in the modern state, replacing Swahili, Baluchi, Urdu and English is a reflection of the consolidation of power in one ethnic group (Bloch 1971). Many minority groups in exile reinvest in their “native” language to an extent never practiced prior to leaving their homeland or places of origin (see Goody 1986; Chatty 2010). In other cases, traditional, local languages are part of a specific cultural setting and therefore have difficulty surviving independently from the maintenance of the social ties and networks, the resources and their allocation as well as the modes of production on which such settings depend (Crawhill 1999). In Oman both linguistic realities co-exist. Some expatriate minorities manage to maintain their traditional’ languages having returned from exile; while other minorities *in situ* struggle to keep their languages alive.

Currently, Oman's official language is Arabic. But Swahili, Urdu, Farsi as well as eight local and, perhaps, aboriginal languages are also spoken in the country. They are Bathari, Harsusi, Hobyot, Jibbali, Khojki, Kumzari, Mahri and Zidgali. Of these, five are unique south Arabian languages spoken in Oman's desert - Bathari, Hobyot, Jibbali, Mahri and Harsusi.^{iv} As a cultural heritage, these languages and their oral traditions are not formally appreciated in the country. Unlike Jordan, for example, where the Jordanian Commission for Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage has presented its *bedu* oral traditions and culture in the regions of Petra and Wadi Rum to UNESCO for formal recognition as part of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage, Oman officials remain mute about the country's linguistic treasures (UNESCO 2009).

Historical Background

Like so many states of the Middle East, Oman has been inhabited by successive waves of peoples. Settlement in Oman from the desert fringe came from two directions: one along the southern coast of Arabia from Yemen and the other through the northern gateway of Al-Buraymi. The northern part of Oman is distinctly influenced by the northern migrations via Al-Buraymi and is clearly Arab, Muslim and tribal. The southern region, Dhofar, also Muslim and tribal, has much closer cultural ties with Yemen and is home to a number of Himyaritic or south Arabian language speakers. These pastoral tribes in the middle of the country are the most remote and marginal peoples in Oman physically; culturally they form distinct heterogeneous groups seemingly at odds with contemporary government efforts to create a unified state. Other migrations into Oman include the Baluch and Persian from Southwest Asia, African and Zanzibari from the East coast of Africa, and Hydrabadis from the Indian Subcontinent. The latter have settled in the coastal regions and the mountain valleys mainly of the north of the

country (for greater detail of ethnic composition see Peterson 2004; Peterson 2004a).

Insert map of Oman

Until 1970, the Sultanate of Oman could justifiably be described as the “Tibet of Arabia” (Eickelman 1989), so complete was its isolation from the rest of the world. This remoteness and sense of separateness of the state was largely created during the long reign of Sultan Said Al Said (1932-1970). It was a time when many urban Omanis fled the country seeking education and livelihood opportunities. During this period the tribes of the desert interior maintained their largely subsistence livelihoods including local trade and barter with coastal settlements. What little transformation took place along the coastal and mountain settlements in the north of the country had little, if any impact, on the desert tribes.

The Al Bu Said Dynasty came to power in 1744 as a result of an election among the Ibadi constituency of the time.^v This dynasty was able to maintain its hold on power both in the interior of the country as well as abroad (variously in Zanzibar and South Western Asia) with swings in authority and power due to some short-lived rebellions and aborted insurrections.^{vi} In the mid 19th century a rapid decline in Al Bu Said fortunes ensued and British interests in Oman came to be directed - until Indian independence in 1947 - from Delhi rather than from Whitehall.

For the whole of the 20th century and into the 21st century, Oman has had four rulers: Faysal (1888- 1913), Taymur (1913-1932), Said (1932 -1970) and Qaboos (1970 to the present). All four rulers owed their position to British support in one way or another. Although Faysal was not prepared for leadership by the British through any form of specialized education, his peaceful accession

to the thrown was facilitated by the British who let it be known that they would not support any competing claims. During Taymur's reign, growing unrest in the interior by the followers of the resurgent Imamate culminated in the British-brokered Treaty of Seeb in 1920. This treaty marked the *de facto* division of Oman into a proto-autonomous interior under the spiritual and religious leadership of an Ibadi Imam and a coastal strip under the secular rule of the Sultan.^{vii} By the time Said was formally recognized as the ruler of Oman in 1932, the 21 year-old inherited a country riddled with financial difficulty and was hardly able to create any sources of income – outside of levying customs and issuing postage stamps - to repay the mounting debt owed to the British government.

Oil exploration commenced in Oman during the 1930s and a number of oil companies began making small payments to the Sultan Said in order to maintain their rights to exploration. In the central desert of Oman, both the Harasiis and the Jeneba nomadic pastoral tribes were affected by these activities. The Jeneba tribe, closely watching oil exploration in the area, laid claim to the Jiddat-il-Harasiis maintaining it was their land which they merely permitted the Harasiis to occupy. Sultan Said dismissed the Jeneba claim. Wilkinson, moreover, suggests that the Sultan's true motive in coming down on the side of the Harasiis was his confidence that the Harasiis had no relationship with the Ibadi Imam and thus potentially were allies in his claim to future oil rights in the central desert interior (Wilkinson 1987).

Oil activity in Oman stopped during World War II at time when Said set out to cooperate completely with the British. British Royal Air Force (RAF) installations were set up throughout the parts of Oman which he controlled and, in return, he received support in modernizing the small armed forces which, again, the British had established in the country with a contingent imported from Baluchistan in 1921 (Peterson 1978).

In the early 1950s oil activity resumed and pastoral tribes in the north of

the country, bordering on areas under the control of the Ibadi Imam, were increasingly drawn into the growing armed conflict between the Sultan on the coast and the Ibadi Imam in the interior.^{viii} In 1952 the Imam led a rebellion which spilled over into a contestation over ownership of any oil finds by petroleum company exploration teams. In 1959 a combined assault by the Sultan's forces and those of the British on the Jebel Akhdar defeated the Ibadi Imam and his rebels. The success of that campaign heralded a period of genuinely close cooperation with British authorities. Perhaps in recognition of the vital role these forces played in consolidating his authority over the entire country, the Sultan willingly approved significant military expenditure after 1967 when oil revenues began to flow into his coffers. For other expenditures, Said remained cautious perpetually searching for a way to gradually develop the country without "modernizing" it.

Ever fearful that "his people" were not ready to move into the 20th century, Sultan Said prohibited the general importation of cars and severely restricted the enrollment of boys in schools. He took a direct interest in all matters regarding changes to long-held "traditions." He banned sunglasses and torches and insisted that the gates of the capital of Muscat be closed at sunset. Those caught outside had to wait until the next morning to enter the town. He permitted only three schools to operate over the entire country admitting 100 boys a year, who he personally chose. Yet Sultan Said, himself, was cultured and cosmopolitan. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he made annual trips to the United Kingdom, generally in the summer.

In 1964, oil was discovered in the central desert of Oman and by 1967, it began to be exported. Projected revenues jumped dramatically, but even then Said remained cautious about spending money he did not yet have. Thus, although he commissioned plans for a new port at Muscat and a hospital in Ibri among other projects, he took his time giving the go-ahead to implement these works,

waiting first to accumulate the cash reserves to pay for these activities. Until his overthrow by his son, Qaboos, Said continued to act and behave with the shrewdness and calculation of someone always on the edge of financial ruin.

Omanis had been fleeing the country for decades during Said's (1932-1970) due to economic hardship, political oppression, and lack of educational opportunities. By the summer of 1970, British forces quietly instigated and supported a coup d'état by Qaboos. After the palace coup, the new Sultan prioritized the modernization and development of his country. Qaboos embraced "progress" wholeheartedly and set about commissioning schools, clinics, hospitals, roads and other infrastructural development. Unlike that of many of the states of the Gulf, Oman's indigenous population was relatively large and markedly heterogeneous. In the north of the country it included an elite urban merchant class with strong cultural ties and trade links with India and the coast of East Africa. Along the coast, subsistence fishing settlements were common, and in the mountains and intervening valleys, terraced farming communities survived by maintaining ancient systems of water collection and distribution (Wilkinson 1977). The towns of the interior of the country were the centres of local and regional trade as well as of religious learning. These settlements mirrored Oman's long history of successful colonial empire and incorporated East African, Baluchi, Persian and Indian elements into the dominant culture.

Once he had established his reign, Sultan Qaboos reached out to all Omanis living abroad and encouraged them to return to the country as quickly as possible. This they did in large numbers from Bombay, Mombasa, Liverpool and other Western centres. Along with this returning "citizenry" came skilled European, particularly British, and South Asian expatriate workers to help build a government infrastructure nearly from scratch. The armed forces, the police force, the internal security service, the civil service, and government ministries of health, education, social affairs and labour, agriculture and fisheries, water and

electricity, communications and roads among others were rapidly set up. The trappings of a modern state were put into place almost overnight. Thousands of miles of roads were tarmacked, and Muscat was connected for the first time by a modern road network to Salalah. The social and economic transformation of the coastal areas and the mountains behind in both the north and the south of the country, funded mainly by petroleum extracted from the central desert, was enormous. The same was not true of the interior desert areas of the country or for its nomadic pastoral peoples.

The Harasiis tribe in Contemporary Oman

The Harasiis along with the Wahiba, the Duru and the Jeneba are the four main nomadic pastoral tribes in the central desert of Oman. The Wahiba tribe of about 7,000 people occupy the southern coast of Oman and the desert interior known as the Wahiba Sands. To the West of the Wahiba Sands are the Duru camel-raising tribe, numbering about 9,000. Spread out along much of Oman's southern coast and adjacent interior are the Jeneba; and their numbers are easily in excess of 12,000. To the south of the Duru and Wahiba are the Harasiis tribe. Moving over what was - until the 1950s - a vast, waterless plain of more than 42,000 square kilometres, the Harasiis are a "refuge" tribe. They are people, largely of Dhofari origin, who have been pushed over recent centuries into this most inhospitable core area of the central desert of Oman. They are the most remote and isolated of already marginal peoples. The region they inhabit separates north Oman from Dhofar. As such, the region has attracted individuals and groups expelled from their own tribe as punishment for major infractions of traditional codes of conduct and honour. The Harasiis tribe speaks a southern Arabian language related to Mahri, an indicator of their lack of contact and relative isolation certainly in the past few centuries (Johnstone 1977). The tribe's

usufruct or rights to access graze and browse found in the Jiddat il-Harasiis were established in the 1930s when the Sultan and his political advisor, Bertram Thomas, decided to confer the name Jiddat il-Harasiis ^{ix} upon the territory which had fallen to them as much by occupancy as by the lack of desire of any other tribe to be there (Thomas 1938).

Insert map of Jiddat il-Harasiis Oman

The Harasiis tribe clearly represent the most excluded element of the Omani peoples. The leadership of the tribe as a whole lies with the Bayt Aksit whose ancestral forbearer is acknowledged to have united the disparate units into one tribe in the middle of the 19th century. From about the mid-1930s the Harasiis tribal leader has made annual trips, generally to Salalah, in order to receive cash gifts - along with the other Omani tribal leaders - from the Sultan.

The tribe is small, numbering about 5,000 people. Although their claim to the Jiddat has been, on occasion, contested by other groups, no other tribe has actually attempted to move into this most desolate of landscapes with little if any seasonal grasses, no natural water sources, and unfit for human habitation during the scorching summer months. It was only with the oil activity of the 1950s that the fortunes of the Harasiis and their grazing lands on the Jiddat were transformed. In 1958 an exploratory party came to a point called Haima in the middle of the Jiddat il-Harasiis and sank a water well there to support its oil activity. Another well was sunk at a point 70 kilometres towards the coast, called al-Ajaiz. These two wells were the first water sources on the Jiddat il-Harasiis, an area approximately the size of Scotland. Al-Ajaiz became something of a magnet attracting pastoral families to its well and its seasonal browse. The Haima well was not used to the same extent as that at Al Ajaiz, because the area surrounding Haima was a salt flat with very little graze or browse for the herds of camels and

goats.

The traditional economy of the Harasiis was based on the raising of camels and goats by natural graze for the production of milk rather than meat. At the core of their way of life was migration determined by a combination of seasonal and ecological variables in the location of pasture and water. Survival of both herds and herders made movement from deficit to surplus areas vital. Households were, and are still, generally extended family units, the average family being composed of nine members. Generally three or four adults, of one degree of kinship or another, make up the household. On average a household keeps 100 goats, which are owned by and the responsibility of women and older girls, and twenty-five camels which are owned by and the responsibility of men. Of these camels, five or six are generally kept near the homestead – these are the heavily pregnant or lactating ones. The remainder of the camels are left free to graze in the open desert. The whereabouts of these animals are very carefully monitored and an elaborate camel information exchange system operates among all the tribesmen. When they meet, tribesmen first exchange news about the conditions of pastures, then the whereabouts of various loose camels, and finally news items of various family members. Homesteads are generally moved a significant distance three or four times a year.^x

Basic to the organization of all pastoral people is the existence of sedentary communities in adjacent areas and access to their agricultural products. For the Harasiis tribe, their trading towns have been along the northern desert foothills of the Sharqiyya particularly Adam and Sinaw as well as the southern town of Salalah. For the Harasiis, the relationship with the villages reinforced not a cash economy, but a subsistence one. Until the late 1970s, this economic interaction was unchanged among the Harasiis and extended no further than these border desert villages and towns.

Transforming and Contesting Authenticity

In the early months of 1980, I was offered an opportunity to join a small convoy of vehicles across the desert of Oman. The trip was to start in Salalah, the capital of Dhofar, the southern region of Oman, and to cross the deserts of Oman and end up in Muscat. It was not quite the retracing of the steps of the early Twentieth Century explorers, Bertram Thomas (1930s) and Wilfred Thesiger (1940s), but it still felt a rare opportunity and unique adventure. The purpose of the journey was partially to track several lapsed tuberculosis patients from tribes in the Dhofari interior and, at the same time, to provide immunization vaccines to any children we came across from these communities. Half way through our journey we came across a small group of nomadic pastoral Harasiis women and children preparing for a wedding. We took the opportunity to stop and to seek their permission to begin the course of immunization against some of the six World Health Organization (WHO) targeted childhood diseases (poliomyelitis, diphtheria, tetanus, measles, and rubella). “Why,” we were asked, “did we want to do this?” Our answer was, “The Sultan of Oman wishes to see all Omanis immunized against these diseases.” “Why,” they continued, “should he want to do this for us?” We were initially lost for an answer, having assumed that the sense of belonging to one nation had reached these parts of the country. That did, in fact, develop over time; however, the tie to the desert landscape of the Jiddat, that social construction of belonging to that locale was not undermined in the process.

The following year, I began a fourteen-year close association with this small nomadic pastoral tribe. My role was to assist the government of Oman in extending social services to this remote community. A Royal Decree had been issued indicating that government services were to be extended into the interior desert “without forcing its migratory people to settle.” A policy had been formulated by the Sultan which needed to move through a descending hierarchy

of bureaucracy and emerge as a set of discretionary decisions made locally and on the ground^{xi}. Sultan Qaboos had encouraged the government ministries to push ‘development’ forward into the remote interior of the country to offer its people the same services which the government had extended to the rest of the country during the first ten years of his reign. His perception of the desert landscape as a ‘created’ physical, social, and cultural environment inhabited by nomadic pastoral, was undoubtedly informed by his own mother’s origins as a Qara tribeswoman in Dhofar. Yet prior to this, in the 1970s, a British white paper – recognizing the significance of oil discoveries in the region - had encouraged Sultan Qaboos to declare the central deserts terra nullius; a land legally empty of people. These two contradictory positions at the highest level of authority in the country have since resulted in a contestation over identity and landscape.

Over a two-year period, as a ‘Technical Assistance Expert’ with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and with the help of two Peace Corps volunteers, I was allowed by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education to set up both mobile and sedentary health services as well as a weekly boarding school for boys with day-enrollment for girls (Dyer 2006). Other government services with a relevance to these mobile pastoralists were more difficult to organize. It seemed that the contradictory “hilltop” policy formulations of the Sultan had been manipulated and interpreted by the descending bureaucratic hierarchy to create a landscape in the desert which attempted to reproduce the settled, “civilized” landscapes they were familiar with in the coastal and mountain valley settlement. For example, opening government offices in the remote tribal centre of Haima and staffing it with Omani government employees generally meant borrowing all the rules and regulations of a civil service developed around *hadari*, settled, needs. Thus government welfare benefits became possible for unmarried, widowed, and divorced women, the handicapped and disabled. But to the surprise of the Harasiis community, elderly

widowers or bachelors with no family to support them were excluded from government support.^{xii}

Shelter and housing were particularly problematic as government officials and ministers were unable or unwilling to conceive of the desert as being previously occupied by temporary camps; they set about creating specific permanent housing settlements. The urban concepts of settled space ruled supreme. The reality of the wide-spread dispersal of small impermanent household camps over the 40,000 square kilometres of the Jiddat was inconceivable to government bureaucrats, whatever the Royal Decrees might have suggested. Hence our 1982 highly-successful UNDP programme of canvas tent distribution among the Harasiis households met with obstruction and eventually failure when we tried to set it up as a recurrent government programme after the formal end of the UN project the following year. In an interview with the Minister of Housing in Muscat in 1984 to plead for a continuation of the tent distribution programme, I was told that the Ministry had to be seen to be doing something useful in the interior and tents were not useful or progressive. The Minister added that he needed to show that the Ministry was active and that could only be done with permanent “mortar and cement”; canvas cloth was temporary and undignified. His conclusion was that the government had to build cement housing—units of twenty to thirty British-designed two-story town houses; no matter that such architectural space was more suitable to an English suburb than an Arabian desert.^{xiii} The units were built in 1985 and stood empty for more than a decade. The general lack of cooperation among the Harasiis slowly gave way to limited and begrudging use by some as who used the structures to shelter Harasiis goat herds, or hired them out to expatriate labourers imported by local traders and oil company sub-contractors. Nonetheless, the government civil servant’s outsider view of the desert landscape became more powerful than that of the insider inhabitant.

The distribution of potable water was another area of critical concern to the Harasiis tribe, but not fully understood by government where rules of auctioning time for watering of agriculture was well established (see Wilkinson 1977). In the mid-1980s, Harasiis tribal elders petitioned the government to finance a carefully constructed decentralized plan to distribute water to households spread out over the Jiddat il-Harasiis based on a horizontal organization in which all seven of the tribe's lineages were involved. These petitions reached mid-level government bureaucrats who found the demands unfathomable. Much easier, they felt, to extend the system which worked in Oman's towns and villages; to hand over the keys to the water bowser trucks to the tribal leaders recognized by the government and the national oil company, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). For many years thereafter, water distribution rested in the hands of a few powerful individuals who were cultivating ties with the multinational oil companies and urban leadership rather than with an egalitarian, but untied, syndicate as the tribal elders had hoped for.

Even the request for agricultural extension - a national programme wide spread along the coast and in the interior towns of the country and well-funded by various international agencies such as USAID and the PDO, national oil company - failed to be transferred to the desert interior. In this case, it was the official status of terra nullius which compromised Harasiis efforts to access development assistance. Despite numerous requests for assistance from Harasiis tribal elders to government to help them improve breed stock and experiment in growing salt-resistant fodder, there was no government response. Those in power were ignorant of and disinterested in tribal subsistence and its potential for marketing. Government livestock extension programmes in the country were restricted - and continue to be - to the coast and interior towns.^{xiv}

For decades the PDO was perceived locally as the government in the desert. Its exploration activities had resulted in three water wells being left open

and maintained for the use of the local Harasiis, a service which was widely appreciated. As the major employer in the region – albeit generally for unskilled and short-term work – it had a grasp of the social makeup and organization of these nomadic pastoralists. Thus, when the international demand for greater social responsibility resulted in the requirement that environmental and social impact assessments be conducted prior to any further oil extraction in the Central Desert of Oman, much could have been expected with regards to the complex nature of the Jiddat “landscape.” However, in numerous conversations with local and expatriate petroleum engineers, a technical view of place emerged; the desert in their opinion was a landscape full of promising mineral resources [gas and oil] and devoid of people. These company engineers maintained that people emerged opportunistically from other regions whenever the oil company set up camp.^{xv} This particular representation of the desert was mirrored in the expert reports commissioned by the oil companies regarding social impact assessments. As late as 2006, Occidental Petroleum carried out a preliminary environment impact assessment of an important tribal grazing area, Wadi Mukhaizana (Fucik 2006). The “findings” of that report was that the area was devoid of people and thus no social impact assessment was necessary.

Although Mukhaizana may have been physically empty of people at the time of the brief visit of the European consultant, the absence of people and herds at that moment was related more to the lack of rain in that season than an a lack of tribal use rights to the Wadi. Only five years earlier the largest oil company in Oman had commissioned a social impact assessment of the same Wadi and found significant numbers of authentic local Harasiis there (Rae and Chatty 2001). Those findings were ignored and Occidental has since developed a spaghetti junction of oil and gas infrastructure in the Wadi, devastating the grazing area for a large number of Harasiis families. Their rights to this land have been denied and no adequate compensation or restitution has been considered. Overall, the

major oil companies in the central desert of Oman take the government view that these concession areas are terra nullius (Gilbert 2007). They lay their pipe lines across important tribal migration routes causing disruption if not obstruction for Harasiis herders trying to transport or move their herd from one grazing area to another.^{xvi} A slow and gradual process of dislocation is taking place based on the oil companies' unwillingness to recognize the authenticity of the Harasiis seasonal presence on their traditional grazing lands. This is followed by a process of displacement which is gradually forcing some Harasiis off their lands altogether and into shabby and crowded government low-cost housing at Haima.

Furthermore, conservationists – both national and international - have regarded the central desert of Oman as land empty of people as well. Their immediate and closer contact with the local people is at odds with the fiction of terra nullius, and as such must ignore the presence and authenticity of its local human inhabitants. Conservationists working in Oman generally do regard the desert as a constructed landscape, but one shaped by plants and animals, not people. Their concern is to restore a balance to this landscape by first returning to it an animal that had been hunted to extinction in the 1970s.

Planned in the late 1970s, the international flagship conservation efforts, the Arabian Oryx Re-introduction Project, was set up and put into effect in the Jiddat il-Harasiis. This process was envisaged from abroad and created in the offices of the His Majesty, the Sultan's Advisor for the Environment without any consultation with the local Harasiis tribesmen in the desert. Between 1980 and 1996, 450 Arabian oryx were either returned to "the wild" or were born in the Jiddat il-Harasiis with Harsusi males hired to track these animals. In 1994, Oman succeeded in getting this conservation project recognized formally as the UNESCO World Heritage Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. But ongoing and constant friction between the western managers of the conservation project and the local Harasiis tribesmen regarding their "rights" to graze their domestic herds in large

parts of their territory – then officially a UNESCO nature reserve - eventually resulted in a distancing from the project by the Harasiis and general lack of cooperation for the conservation project.

Two representations of the desert landscape came to a head: a Western conservation protectionist vision of a pristine landscape of plants and animals and local tribal vision of a landscape where there were sets of cultural and historical concepts relating people and domestic animals to desert spaces and places. When between 1996 and 1998 poaching and illegal capture of the oryx by rival tribes resulted in the loss of more than 350 animals, the Harasiis could do little to stop this downward spiral. Other tribes were actively acting out their disaffection. For the Harasiis, their youth had become alienated, and the elders were no longer interested in the transformed landscape in the part of their traditional territory which had been taken from them without their consent. In 2007, the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary became the first World Heritage site to ever be deleted from the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. The justification for this unprecedented step was the rapid decline in oryx number (from 450 to 65) and the supposed degradation of its grazing area.

Even place names have not been immune to this contemporary move to homogenize the diverse social and cultural landscapes of the modern Omani state. Throughout the country place names that reflect a tribal origin are being changed by civil servants somewhere in a mid-level hierarchy in the public authority responsible for maps and map names. The Wahiba Sands [of the Wahiba tribe] are now officially being labelled as the Eastern Sands. Attempts to drop the name Harasiis from the Jiddat il-Harasiis are also afoot. At a meeting of the Omani Historical Association in 2006, which I attended, it was clearly articulated that there were official government efforts to “neutralize” place names so that they did not reflect tribal affiliation. This pertained particularly to the deserts but did not extend to the interior mountainous valleys of the *hadar* such as the Wadi Beni

Kharus or the Wadi Beni Auf. These interior valleys were closely associated with the large and often powerful families serving in government. It seems the neutralization of place names and their separation from peoples traditionally associated with them is only effectively being carried out in deserts where *bedu* live but not in ‘civilized places’ of the *hadar* interior towns, valleys and cities. Such moves support the government’s action of declaring all land state land and declaring Oman’s deserts terra nullius, whereas Oman’s coastal plain and mountain valleys are inhabited by *hadar* and there, the rights of traditional occupancy are respected.

Oman’s six south Arabian languages were recognized in the early linguistic work of Tom Johnstone in the 1970s. The Diwan of the Royal Palace, on the command of the Sultan, commissioned Miranda Morris in 1980 to write lexicons and dictionaries of each of the six languages. A project of the Palace of nearly thirty years duration was initiated as a “hilltop” policy formulation to recognize the unique contribution that these languages make to Omani and world culture. Despite this programme – or perhaps because of the way a “hilltop” policy has not been translated effectively through the bureaucratic hierarchy into local practice - in 2009, five of these six languages – Bathari, Harsusi, Hobyot, Jibbali, and Mahri – are on the UNESCO List of endangered languages (UNESCO 2009). It is one thing to record the linguistic contribution these minorities speak, it is another to encourage and promote their use. The Omani education system teaches only Arabic; there is no programme to support traditional and local languages, much to the concern of native speakers. Rightly or wrongly Omani bureaucrats have not acted on the Sultan’s interest in the authentic languages of the country; instead they have interpreted the Sultan’s wish to see a homogenized Omani national identity requiring all Omanis to speak Arabic. The six south Arabian languages of the country are being systematically disregarded, while world bodies seek to safeguard these unique elements of

intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The authenticity of the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral tribes has been challenged by national government and multi-national bodies which have their own views on the constructed landscapes of Oman. Recognizing the tensions which exist between the traditional and modern, as well as the *bedu* and the *hadar* has meant that representations of landscapes are subject to the power of the hegemonic. Space and place are not resolved in a singular representation that encapsulates the political fiction of a unified state. There is no one absolute landscape, but rather a series of related and also contradictory perspectives. Omani policy formulations recognize elements of the authenticity of the Harasiis vision of their desert landscapes. But bureaucratic hierarchy prioritizes and puts into practice landscape perspectives quite contrary: *hadar* landscapes imposed upon *bedu* territories; multinational extractive industry's perspectives of landscapes of no human imprint, but replete with natural resources under the surface; and conservation landscapes of pristine import momentarily unbalanced by humans' disregard for the equilibrium of flora and fauna. These visions explain the lack of interest in the authenticity of Harasiis culture and language, in the lack of government interest in developing or promoting Harasiis livestock raising economy; and the disinterest by oil companies to Harasiis claims to spaces and places they have inhabited at one time or another for centuries.

The Harasiis are increasingly becoming dislocated by the current prospecting and extractive activity of the oil and gas industry. Their restricted access to areas adjacent to the former Arabian Oryx Sanctuary has also impacted heavily on their sense of mobility and grazing rights. Contemporary government unwillingness to recognize the importance of mobility in their way of life is

threatening their freedom of movement as families are increasingly finding themselves tied to government centres in order to access education, health and welfare for the vulnerable weak, the young and the old.

For the first three decades of Oman's modern nation-building history (from 1970 to the present) a truly integrationist approach seemed to hold where all Omanis from whatever background were called upon to work together to build a new "modern" nation. Now, however, with much of the building in place, an assimilationist outlook and approach seems to reign supreme which is curiously out of step with global trends. The first few decades after World War II were marked by an assimilationist flavour to nation-state creation as characterized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) Resolution 107 of 1957 regarding the treatment of traditional and local peoples. After successful lobbying by interest groups and member countries from Latin America, in particular, this Resolution was replaced by an the integrationist ILO Resolution 169 in 1989 to reflect the transformed vision of nation-building held by most of its members. Yet Oman, in its recent failures to recognize the authenticity of its minority tribes in their desert landscapes, seems to have replaced an open-minded, ahead-of-its time, integrationist vision of the development of the modern state with a backward-looking assimilationist perspective at the expense of the country's unique *bedu* heritage, landscape and linguistic tradition.

One might ask how those who are rejected from the central construct of national identity and marginalized in the construction of special landscapes maintain their own special forms of collective authenticity (Lindholm 2008, 125). The Harasiis tribe appears to be addressing the challenges to its authenticity and its desert landscapes in several ways. Attachment to place and space is difficult to transform. Disassociation is even harder. Many families are responding by setting up part of the extended group in government housing, while still maintaining their mobile herds of goat and camels with hired shepherds from Baluchistan and the

Indian Subcontinent. During school breaks and national holidays, these family groups return then to the desert camps where their livestock are being held. Often the older generation of male Harsuusi remains with the herds and the hired help throughout the year. Younger Harsuusi men achieving success in trade and transport businesses and living in permanent accommodation are transforming part of their profits into building up herds of camels and goats with hired help; they visit these livestock camps regularly to “maintain their roots.” Others with less means, living in government housing, stubbornly hold on to their cultural identity by keeping a few head of goat or camel in small fenced enclosures adjacent to their cement housing. A few have moved part of the extended family group across borders to the United Arab Emirates where the national perception of the desert landscape and the place of the *bedu* in it are mirrored by their own vision. These transnational families generally maintain their herds in their traditional desert landscapes of Oman. For the Harasiis, identity and authenticity is tied to the desert landscape which includes people, livestock and wild life. And although mobility is important, it is not the only defining feature of the self-perception and identity. Although some western images of an “authentic primitivism” has begun to creep into government discourse - viewing pastoralists, like those Harasiis, who no longer migrate with their animals as somehow no longer authentic - the Harasiis themselves, do not make such distinctions (Lindholm 2008, 131).

These moves are not permanent, nor are the settlements static. The Harasiis continue to move back and forth across the borders of Oman. They continue to embrace their marginality in the Gellnerian sense and thus proclaim the continued importance - to them - of a political and social order outside the state. In Abu Dhabi, their sense of “being *bedu*” is reinforced by other tribal groups also moving into these created desert landscapes from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman. Furthermore, mass education and mass communications (Eickelman

1992) also reinforces their sense of authenticity.^{xvii} The United Arab Emirates national identity is closely tied with both the *bedu* in the interior and the *hadar* merchants in the coastal towns. Here several representations of landscapes encapsulate the imagined state including that of the *hadar* and that of the *bedu*. As with the Kingdom of Jordan (see Layne 1994; Shryock 1995) *bedu* culture and its role in the development of the notion of national identity is important in the UAE. Unfortunately this is not, at present, the case of Oman. There seems to be in Oman no recognition, yet, that assimilating traditional or aboriginal people is not the way to build a strong country (Blackburn 2007). Recognition of the tribes and their authenticity in the desert of Oman would not radically pluralize Oman nor negatively impact on state-building processes. It would instead be a step in the celebration of the unique character and diversity of the Oman nation and its many social and cultural landscapes.

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Endnotes

ⁱ **Error! Main Document Only.** The term '*bedouin*' is a French language derivative of the Arabic *badia*, meaning the semi-arid steppe or desert. Those who live in the *badia* are described as *bedu*.

ⁱⁱ Landscapes are complex phenomena. In addition to the physical features of geography, there is a widely accepted contemporary understanding that landscapes reflect human activity and are imbued with cultural values.

Landscapes combine notions of time and space as well as political and social constructs. They evolve over time, are changed through human activity, and acquire many layers of sometimes contested meanings and versions of reality.

Connections with landscapes form part of cultural and political identity; people feel they belong to certain places or regions (Jackson, J. 1984; Aplin, G. 2007).

People form meaningful relationships with the locales they occupy and thus transform these spaces into places. Eric Hirsch suggests that landscape in an anthropological sense has two meanings, one as a framing device used 'objectively' to bring people into view, the other as a social construct to refer to the meanings people impute to their surroundings (1995:1).

ⁱⁱⁱ Similar associations are made in other regions where colonial or settler land rights are prioritized over aboriginal ones. Cerwonka considers the way in which Aboriginal land rights in Australia were wiped away by the settler establishment using the legal fiction of *terra nullius* to declare the land empty. This was accompanied by narratives of aboriginal primitiveness and ignorance (2004).

^{iv} A six south Arabian language found in Oman, Socotri, is not on the UNESCO list of endangered language.

^v Ibadi Islam has a long history in Oman. The Ibadi sect of Islam had its origins in Basra at the end of the 7th century when opposition emerged to the transfer of leadership from Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad to the Umayyad

dynasty in Damascus. One of the founders of the sect was the Omani, Abd Allah bin Ibad Al Murri al Tamimi. Ibadism today is found in Oman and in pockets in North Africa.

^{vi} Until late in 18th century, Oman was ruled by an Ibadi Imam and the state was called an Imamate. However in 1792, in the Compact of Barka, Sultan bin Ahmad was recognized as the secular ruler of Muscat (and the coastal areas), while his brother, Said was allowed to keep the office of Imam in the interior of the country (Wilkinson, J. 1972).

^{vii} The combined entity of the ‘Sultanate of Muscat and Oman’ was to emerge out of this treaty and would remain welded together for three uneasy decades. Sultan Said’s determination to unify the country under his rule alone resulted in considerable debate at the United Nations. In August 1959, British aggression against the ‘independent Imamate of Oman’ was raised at the Security Council. The ‘question’ of Oman and its contested leadership was included on the UN General Assembly agenda each year until 1971, when the Sultanate of Oman was admitted to the United Nations (Peterson, J. 2007).

^{viii} The long political and military struggle between Sultan Said and the Ibadi Imam over control of the interior of the country in the 1950s is studied in great detail by both Wilkinson (1987) Peterson (2007).

^{ix} The Jeneba tribe, it seems, protested that this territory was its own and the Harasiis were simply being accommodated there because they had no land of their own. However the Sultan decided that if the Jeneba wanted to go and live in the region it could be renamed ‘Jiddat-il-Jeneba’, but as long as the Harasiis were the sole occupiers of the Jiddat, it would carry their name (Thomas, B. 1938).

^x In 1980 the Omani government cooperated with the United Nations to implement a two-year anthropological study and needs assessment of the Harasiis tribe. I led this project and as a result was able to promote the opening of a

boarding school in 1982 for boys and later a special day school for girls.

Increasingly over the past two decades Harasiis families have either camped near to Haima or have taken up residence in ‘low-cost’ housing units on the edge of the centre while the schools are in session.

^{xi} Allen Rew has described the constraints regarding policy and practice in development as a pyramid landscape. There is the hilltop where policy is formulated; then the plateau where bureaucratic hierarchy prevails, and at the base a broad expanse of discretionary practice and local coping strategies (Rew, A., E. Fischer, et al. 2000).

^{xii} Harasiis concepts of welfare and aid extended to elderly men and women alike. There was recognition that in the extreme environment of the Jiddat il-Harasiis, generation was as important as gender in determining need.

^{xiii} Interview with Minister of Housing, Ahmed Al Ghazali (Al Ghazali, A. 1984. Interview, Ministry of Housing, Muscat).

^{xiv} The Sultan asked the oil company to set up an experimental farm using artesian water in the desert to show how the ‘desert could bloom’. Rahab Farm was successfully set up near Marmul in the southern province of Oman and proceeded to sell its alfalfa and other grasses locally. But its goat breeding programme, which fascinated the local tribes, was closed down without any effort made to introduce these animals into local herds.

^{xv} These views are common globally in the dispute over petroleum exploration in areas of human habitation. In the Amazonian belt where tribes have sought to remain in isolation, efforts to stop petroleum exploration have resulted in the denial of their existence. Recently the president of Peru, Alan Garcia, was quoted as saying ‘the figure of the jungle native’ is a ruse to prevent oil exploration. Daniel Saba, former head of the state oil company in Peru added more scornfully,

“It is absurd to say there are uncontacted people when no one has seen them. So, who are these uncontacted tribes people are talking (Carroll, R. 2009).

^{xvi} For a brief period of time in the early 1990s, one oil company did agree to bury any new pipelines at five kilometre intervals across the desert to facilitate the requirement of the Harasiis and other nomadic pastoral tribes to move themselves and their animals around the desert floor.

^{xvii} Although use of mobile phones and satellite phones rather than internet suggests greater affinity with the spoken word rather than the written word remains.